



The Polemics of Certification and Credentialing

By Linda A. Osmundson*

Credential: A letter or certificate given to a person to show that [s]he has the right to confidence or the exercise of a certain position or authority. *Webster*

For as long as I have worked in the battered women's movement, around two decades, we have discussed the dilemmas of requiring credentials for staff. The discussion often becomes a heated debate. Interestingly, the women with hard-earned Master's Degrees usually leave the discussion feeling left out and unwanted. They are often bewildered by the passion of the argument. Their "right to confidence or the exercise of a certain position or authority," as in the dictionary definition above, has been denied. This is the very crux of the polemic. In our movement, we have tried to reduce, if not eliminate the hierarchy that credentials imply. Many of our shelters began as workers collectives without directors and supervisors. Many made and still make decisions by consensus. We want to be different with structures that felt more female, more circular, less top down decision-making. By the very definition of the word, a power-differential is determined by a credential.

We want to be a staff of equals and we want to recognize the life-experience of the women who were battered and who were our founders and foremothers. We do not deny the need for more knowledge about how to work with battered women. We do not deny the need for experience. However, we gain knowledge in many different ways. Some of us have the privilege to go to universities and colleges when we are young. Some of us return to school later in life. We earn impressive credentials and our expectation is that we will be both recognized and paid for our time spent learning in this way. We expect to supervise those who have not earned these credentials.

Some of us gain experience by just living. We know about battering through vivid personal lives. We learn about the system. We have bitter, dangerous experiences when the system ignores us and will not help. Sometimes the system is just too complex, too ponderous and slow to help us. The system with its checks and balances meant to prevent fraud, mostly denies us, the women who really, really could use just a little help. We learn how to escape, anyway. We learn to protect our children. We protect our children at school and childcare centers. We learn how to advocate for ourselves and our children. We learn more than we ever wanted to know about the legal system. We learn to survive in spite of a system that does not consistently help us. We gain our voice slowly but inexorably we speak and we SPEAK. We are loud in our advocacy because we have survived indescribable pain and abuse and humiliation.

We speak when no one is listening. We speak until someone, anyone hears us and gives us hope that we are believed. But, in our very own movement, the movement

meant for us, the movement we started for ourselves, someone forgot to listen....again. We are told we cannot work or sometimes even volunteer in a program for women who are battered because we do not have formal, recognized credentials or because we have “issues” or because we have not been out of our relationship for enough time. We are not respected for the life-credentials we have earned the hard way. Our hard-earned credentials are not documented by a formal piece of paper, unless you count the divorce decree. We want respect and recognition for our life-credentials and life-experience.

Women with Credentials Deserve More Pay: This is the economic argument. Those who have formal credentials expect to be paid more because they spent so much money going to school and have debts to pay. A degree earns privileges and opens doors. But battered women have debts to pay, too. We pay for lawyers and court costs to keep our children. We pay credit card debts for our abusers. We pay to provide for our children alone when the promised child support fails to arrive. We pay through lost jobs and lost opportunities. We pay for bus tickets and airline tickets so we can run far enough away to be safe. We pay the health care system to mend our broken bones and battered health. A few of us pay with our lives. Some of us pay with our mental health. Many of us pay for a lifetime of fear.

As shelters and programs have developed, we have become more accepting of diverse women who have been battered. We need knowledge about working with women who are differently abled. We need equipment for working with deaf women and blind women and the knowledge of how to communicate using the equipment and sign language. We need knowledge of differing cultural backgrounds and ability to speak the various languages of our community in order to serve immigrant women. We need knowledge and skills to serve women who are chemically dependent and women who have mental health problems. We need a variety of women with life-skills and academic skills to work together to establish links with other services in our community. We need workers who know the ins and outs of the system and how to make referrals really work. We need workers with the commitment to persist in advocating for the right actions when the first person denies us help for ourselves or the women for whom we are working.

Ideally we need people with both book-smarts and “horse-sense” (as my Arizona cowboy father used to call it). The reason the women without formal degrees are so passionate and loud in this debate about credentials is that they fear that in the debate and struggle they will ultimately lose the powerful community they have envisioned and worked so hard to develop for themselves. The women without formal credentials do not possess the trappings of access to power traditionally recognized by men (and women) in our society.

My personal experience validates these fears. After two decades of learning from and working with women who have been battered, it is still a challenge for me to be recognized as an expert by the courts in communities outside my own. I am asked what classes I have taken in domestic violence. My own marriage taught me more than any class. Of course, I have attended conferences and training sessions on domestic violence but usually I teach the classes and present for the conferences on domestic violence. When I started working with women who were battered, there were no classes, not a mention in sociology books, or even a lecture on women who are battered in courses on mental health or psychology. Yet, even then, individuals with degrees in sociology or mental health or psychology were routinely recognized as court experts while my expertise in the field was denied.

The longer history of the substance abuse and addictions programs is instructive. Addicts and former addicts originally began chemical dependency programs like Alcoholics Anonymous. Today there is hardly a place where a recovering addict can find employment in our country. The medical field and its incumbent value on higher education and specialization have subsumed the addiction field. Those who work in related addictions programs must gain various levels of certification in order to find jobs in their chosen field. The funders have come aboard and will only fund programs that will only hire staff with certain credentials. The collective wisdom of the grass-roots recovering addicts has been virtually credentialed out of existence. No longer can a grass-roots person who cares be a worker in the field that once hired only recovering addicts unless they have the privilege to earn a bachelor's degree and go through extensive additional training and supervision to become an addictions professional. It is as if we want to certify the caring and the passion out of our workers.

Retaining the Grass-roots: Some of my colleagues have sought certificates in "victim advocacy" from one of the national organizations in an effort to give their life-experience some recognized legitimacy. Some state coalitions like Florida have developed certificates for advocates in their states in core competencies and annual training is required. Now there are actually whole college-level courses on domestic violence and even whole degrees that have been developed. While I am thrilled at the progress we have made and for which I have advocated, I continue to advocate that we must also retain our grass-roots value for the life-experience of the diverse women who have been battered and their advocates.

- Shelters and domestic violence outreach programs must always be able to hire grass roots women with life-experience.
- We must never create credentials or degrees that push grass-roots women out of our programs.
- We should value equivalent life experience equally with education when we are determining pay and promotions

Training: This argument for valuing grass-roots women in our programs does not mean we are not responsible for training our co-workers. Just because a worker was once a woman who was battered does not necessarily mean that she understands the philosophical perspective of the movement or of the daily work we do to advocate for survivors. Since we are usually blamed for the battering and usually feel like it is somehow our fault it takes some training to learn a different way to frame our experience. We are isolated and may not initially understand the political and nearly universal nature of battering. We have been prevented from reading feminist theory or taking a woman's study course. Exposure to this thinking and perspective usually creates light-bulb experiences for new workers. It illuminates new perspectives on a traumatic life-experience. It makes sense when nothing made sense before in a horrific life. New workers deserve to be taught this perspective consistently in well-developed training programs. New workers need information about resources and referrals. They need support and tools for dealing with the diverse needs of women and children to come to us for help.

We also have a responsibility to think about the future of our work and our movement. As our programs grow, new skills must be learned for managing them. We have a responsibility to think who will be replacing the fore-mothers that are currently directing

our programs today. Will our Boards of Directors be forced to hire men with business degrees to manage the business of a large domestic violence center? While they may be great managers, they will not have the passion for social change that has created our movement. Do we have a conscious plan to train young women in our movement to replace us? Planning for future demands that we think about this. Many of us at 50 and 60 years old are thinking about retiring and passing the mantle to the next generation. But, before we retire we have an important responsibility to plan for the future. We have a responsibility to prepare the young women who will step in our shoes. It is my hope that they will begin standing on our shoulders, having learned what many of us learned the hard way, making mistakes and getting fired but still returning to do this work.

Certify: To issue a certificate or license to. *Webster*

In the past 10 years, we have debated the merits of certification for programs. In an effort to demonstrate excellence and perhaps to gain some competitive advantage in the world of grant seeking, some sophisticated domestic violence centers are applying for certification from CARF (Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities), JCAHO (Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations) and other national bodies. While the desire to demonstrate that our program has met standards set by these bodies, is laudable, the standards being set are often disempowering and even damaging to the workers and the women we serve.

Most of these standards require that workers performing certain types of work attain advanced academic degrees. This is why I began this paper with a discussion of credentialing. A master's degree in social work, psychology, mental health still does not mean that individual has any training at all about working with survivors of battering. If the degree was obtained more than five years ago we can be assured that there was little to nothing taught in a classroom about domestic violence. The training received is often from a deficit perspective, a victim blaming perspective or, at best, a discussion of trauma. There may be discussion of "battered women's syndrome", again a psychological trauma perspective based on questionable science. Because we are accustomed to viewing most human services from the deficit perspective of what is wrong with the victim or client, we learn nothing about the courage, strength, resourcefulness or creativity of the victim. In only the most feminist of graduate classes might a student learn about the politics of battering or the gender-specific nature of battering.

A colleague recently assured me that certification did not affect her staff who did not have advanced degrees because they are all "grandfathered" in to the program. While she can retain her current staff, her certification enforces the fact that she cannot hire new staff with grass-roots life experience. In a few years all of us from the grass roots perspective will be gone from our programs and the battered women's movement will have evolved to another social service without passion and without movement.

Some of the certifications eschew the dormitory living we have in many shelters for the privacy of individual bedrooms. While privacy is highly valued in the US, the learning, bonding, comforting and sharing that goes on in shared bedrooms may not occur in required private rooms with hotel-like atmosphere.

Certification require case management and therapeutic counseling instead of the advocacy and support groups that we have traditionally provided for women who have

been battered. Treatment is proscribed and copious case notes, blatantly disregarding the fact that we have always minimized notes for fear of being required to submit them to court. Women are told they are suffering from “learned helplessness”, or co-dependency. Women who surrender to treatment are presented as damaged, inadequate mothers by opposing counsel in custody disputes. We are not helpless victims but powerful and courageous survivors whose actions are those of a “reasonable woman” in absolutely terrifying, unreasonable circumstances.

We are moving towards diagnosing women and children with various trauma-related disorders so that we can be reimbursed for treatment by insurance policies and Medicaid. The change is subtle and insidious but may have a blatant impact on women and children. Diagnosing the victim continues to focus the blame and the prescribed relief on the behavior of the victim. We fail to hold the batterer accountable, one more time in our zeal to find the resources to help the victim.

How did we get in to this certification bind in the first place? There are myriad explanations.

1. We are starved for credibility. We want and deserve to be recognized as experts by the courts and even by other helping agencies who may not see our work or our agency as peers due to our less traditional approach as advocates instead of medical practitioners. In our experience at CASA, it took many years for our referrals to the local substance abuse agency to be respected as referrals from knowledgeable peers. We had many meetings to gain the respect and status of peers that we have finally attained. We have finally made some similar progress with referrals to our mental health agencies. This respect and credibility has been hard-earned over more than 25 years in our community. It should not have taken so long. But due to medical and gender bias, it has been a struggle.
2. We need standards for our work. Honestly, there are domestic violence programs that are not doing good work. We have to be better at our jobs and that means learning about fund raising, financial management and human resources issues as well as advocacy for women who have been battered and their children. Many of the domestic violence programs in the US have been in existence for at least twenty years. We are no longer fledgling new non-profits just trying our wings. We should be strong, respected organizations in our communities. We should be as knowledgeable about the business of running our organizations as we are about advocating for women and children. Because we are advocacy organizations primarily run by women, we may face greater scrutiny than organizations that are run by men. While this may not be fair, it is the truth so we have to be especially good at the business of our work.

When we started our work, we never imagined that we would need expertise in building maintenance, technology, human resources, non-profit law and accounting, public relations and marketing, fund raising, organizational development, criminal law, immigration law, corporate law, family law, low income housing and HUD regulations, politics, managing boards of directors, ethics, event planning, investment planning, information and referrals, writing, public speaking and the list goes on. We must be excellent in all of these areas.

3. We must remember our mission and philosophy. We have our roots in feminism, the belief that women and men are equal. Our work is to end violence against women and children that is fundamentally based in inequality of beliefs and opportunities. We acknowledge that some men, especially gay men, are battered. Our work should benefit both women and men but that it is the systematic, historic abuse of women and children that is the nucleus of our work.
4. We can set our own high standards and hold ourselves accountable to these standards. These include serving diverse women being battered. Serving the children that women bring with them. Advocating for fairness in courts and educating police and the justice system. Providing crisis lines and 24-hour access to emergency shelter and making sure we curb our own control issues when working with families in shelter. We must monitor our rules to make sure they are for the safety of the shelter residents and not for the convenience of the staff. We need to train our staff how to work with women and children who are angry, who have drug or alcohol problems or differing abilities. We can make our facilities accessible to deaf or blind women, women in wheel chairs, women who do not speak English or celebrate traditional (Christian) holidays or women who eat food prepared according to differing religions or traditions.
5. We need to advocate for ever-improving systems of protection and confidentiality. Reasonable security systems are imperative. We need to maintain confidentiality when we are using today's technology. Continuing our vigilance in working with funders around contractual requirements is imperative. We cannot settle for contracts that require us to take actions that will endanger survivors simply in order to keep our grants. Vigilance is required when signing such contracts and the responsibility for educating our funders is ours.
6. We must become players in our communities: attend City Council meetings, meet with hospital officials, recruit lawyers and prominent citizens to raise funds and sit on committees for our organizations, get appointed to judicial review committees, organize domestic violence task forces, advocate in the courts and with law enforcement. Become known as a responsible, competent powerful organization.

Let's face it. The pressure for certification comes from several directions. Our own desire for recognition and credibility is an impetus. But sometimes there is a stronger external impetus when we are not running our organizations well or our own control needs outweigh our advocacy for survivors and their children. Sometimes our sister programs want certification in order to raise the standards of weaker, poorly performing programs and staffs. We have been risk takers in this work and we are not done yet. Some of us will need to continue to take risks to advocate for women who are not perfect, whose lives are messy with substance abuse or mental health problems. We must advocate for women who do not speak our language or understand our common traditions. We must continue to advocate for a system that has become complacent about battered women and paternalistic about removing children.

If we are consistently good at what we do then the issues of certification and standards may be moot. We will always make some people and institutions angry with us in our quest for safety and equality for women who have been battered. And our work here is not done yet.

Just this week in my community an abuser intentionally drove his car in to a concrete wall, killing himself and two small children to teach their mother a lesson. Just this week and abuser knifed his wife six times before he killed himself. Our work is not done until abuse stops and women and children are no longer the innocent victims of an abuser who demands absolute power and control over his victims. Our work is not done.... yet.

* CASA's management team has five members. In 2004 our annual budget was \$3 million. Only two of us have four-year college degrees. Two of us are women of color, one of us is Jewish and two of us are survivors, including the Executive Director.

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